



Elmaz Abinader & Arab-American Literature
April 2003

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1. Elmaz Abinader

1. Elmaz Abinader

1. BIOGRAPHY

Source: <http://www.california.com/~elmaza/>

Elmaz Abinader has been an influential voice in American Literature for almost two decades. Her work, from her memoir to her poetry to her performance work, resonates with the complications of the history of our country, its relationship to other cultures and itself. Elmaz is a recent winner of the GOLDIE Award for Literature for 2002.

Abinader makes no secret of her concerns in her writing. She wants to bring the story of Arab-Americans to the literature of inclusion in this country and she uses every means she can master, from writing to acting. The doors for writers of under represented cultures is a major concern.

Her first major work, *Children of the Roojme, A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (Norton, 1991, University of Wisconsin, 1997) was a result of a Post Doctoral Fellowship in the Humanities where she worked with Nobelist Toni Morrison. Early in her career, she won an Academy of American Poets Award and most recently, A Fulbright Senior Scholarship in Egypt.

In her collection, *In the Country of My Dreams...*, Abinader brings together poetry about internal and external geographies. This Collection has been awarded the 2000 Oakland PEN Josephine Miles Literary Award for Multi-cultural Poetry. Many of these works have appeared in anthologies and journals and have won several awards. In addition her poetry has been included in the award winning anthology, *The Poetry of Arab Women*.

She has contributed articles to major collections and newspapers. Most recently her work, *Just Off Main Street*, appeared in an Anthology *Writers on America* released by the State Department. She discusses this project on NPR's Sunday Edition. Other feature articles include, *Profiles* a post-9-11 article in the Living Issue of *Creative Non Fiction* and *Pain in Familiar Faces*, published in 2002 in *New York NewsDay*

Elmaz Abinader's Plays have travelled the world. *Country of Origin*, the storytelling performance Abinader has written and performed has won two Drammies, Portland's Critic's Circle Awards for Theater. This compelling, three-act, one-woman show, portrays the lives of three Arab-American women struggling with cultural conflict and expectations. The original music for *Country of Origin* was composed by Tony Khalife. Her new play, *Under the Ramadan Moon* has had several touring dates with more upcoming. In this play, she explores the typical stereotypes associated with Arabs and

Arab-Americans, and give a new view to a stale perspective. Her current work *When Silence is Frightening* offers three vignettes about Palestine,

Elmaz Abinader's years as a creative writing teacher has prepped her for public presentation and exciting and accessible performing. Throughout her career, she has focused on the stimulation and growth of young writers-of-color, particularly through her participation in the Hurston-Wright Writers' Week West and The Voice of Our Nations Arts Foundation. With a novel and a travel memoir in the works, Abinader's voice will resonate for a long time to come. By working with The Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation, she promotes a centralizing of the voices and traditions of writers of color.

2. PERSONAL INFORMATION

Source: *Directory of American Scholars*, 10th ed. Gale Group, 2001.

Education: Univ Pittsburgh, BA, 74; Columbia Univ, MFA, 78; Univ Nebr, PhD, 85.

Addresses: Contact: Dept of English, Mills Col, 5000 MacArthur Blvd, Oakland, CA, United States 94613-1301 **E-mail:** moses@mills.edu.

CAREER

Field of interest: Creative Writing; Research: Creative writing; fiction and non-fiction; Career history: Assoc prof; Mills Col, 93-.

WORKS

- Auth, *The Children of the Roojme, A Family's Journey from Lebanon*, Madison, WI: Univ Wis Press, 97; *The Children of the Roojme, A Family's Journey*, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 91; *Looking for Our Lives, A Writer's Perspective on American Literature*, Al Majal, 94; *Beyond the Veil and Yemen can Wait*, Metro, 93; *Here, I'm an Arab; There, an American*. The New York Times, 91; poetry, Anthologies: *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*, Eds Dunning and Lueders, NY: Scott Foresman, 94; *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*, Salt Lake City: Univ Utah Press, 88; *All My Grandmothers Could Sing*, Lincoln, Nebr: Free Rein Press, 84; mag, *Footworks: Paterson Lit Rev*, *Living with Opposition*, *Arabic Mus*, *Letters from Home*, 94.

La PeÒa Cultural Center, Berkeley, December 13, 2000

Gill Theatre, University of San Francisco, June 29, 2000

Porter Troupe, Gallery, San Diego, May 5, 2000

Information provided by the Information Resource Center
Embassy of the United States of America
Madrid, Spain

Country of Origin, a Story Telling Performance

1999 Performances

Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, Portland, Oregon, 2 Week run (Awarded two Drammies)

Egypt: University of Alexandria, Damanhour

PAO Residence, Cairo

Al-Thalia Theater, Cairo

1998 Performances

Saint Mary's College, Barnes & Noble in San Jose, Arlington, Va, San Francisco;
Women and Children First Books, Chicago, Modern Times, SF, Powells Bookstore,
Portland Lenoir Rhyne College, Mills College; UC- Berkeley.

Breaking the Fast, A Story Telling Performance

1999 Performance

Celebration of Black History Month, Saint Mary's College

Poetry and Prose:

2000 Readings PEN Oakland Awards, Oakland Virginia Book Fair, Charlottesville, VA
Mama Bears Books, Berkeley

1999 Readings

Sanaa University & Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center, PAO Residence,
Sanaa University, Yemeni-Arab Language Institute, Sanaa, Yemen; University of Aden,
Movenpick ,Aden, Yemen Arab American Writers Conference, Chicago Vertigo Books,
Washington, D.C. US Embassy, Al-Isra University; PAO Residence: Jordan

1998 Readings

The Supreme Council of Culture of Egypt, The Translation Symposium, Cairo
University, Alexandria University, Barnes and Nobles, Powell's Books, Modern Times,
and Black Oak Books.

Lectures and Presentations:

Writers and Musicians Collaborate, Voices Summer Workshop, USF, 28 June 2000

From Page to Stage, Taking a Story to Performance, Popular Culture Convention,
New Orleans, 22 April, 2000

Arab American Writers Panel, Virginia Book Fair, Charlottesville, VA, 25 March,
2000

The Arab American Story in Drama and Film, Arab American Writers Conference,
Chicago, Il, 10 October 1999

Lots of Men, One Lesbian, & a Fashion Show, International Women's Studies:

Stories from Yemen, Mills College, 12 October 1999

Filling in the Gaps: Women Responding to History. A Practitioners's View,
Women's Studies Conference; Women's Literature in the United States, Sanaa University,
The Experience of Arab American Writers in the U.S., University of Aden, Yemen , 9-17

September 1999

Origins Series, Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center , Portland, 6 May 1999 **Trends in Egyptian and American Literature: A Millennium Evening**, U.S. Embassy, Cairo, 24 November.

Making Tracks: Women of Color and Their Writing, Mills College, 11 July 1998

Culture as an Influence on Arab-American Literature, ADC Conference, Washington, D.C., 13 June 1998

Fiction Writers Panel, & Publishing Panel, from Pen to Print, Mills College, 14 March, 1998

3. PROFILE: *ELMAZ ABINADER -- IN THE MIX* by Mofid Deak

Source: <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0200/ijse/elmaz.htm>

From her base in northern California, Elmaz Abinader is one of the more luminous and multifaceted Arab American writers of the day, an award-winning artist of Lebanese origin and an educator.

Her creative origins are that of a poet -- beginning with studies at Columbia University, where she received her master of fine arts degree in poetry and a doctorate in creative writing. For her post-doctoral fellowship in the humanities, Abinader worked on what was to be her first major published volume, *Children of the Roojme, A Family's Journey From Lebanon*. Her adviser was the prominent African American novelist, Nobel literature laureate Toni Morrison

Published in 1991, *Children of the Roojme* spans four generations and two continents. It traces the Abinaders from their homeland to small-town western Pennsylvania, and the journey of the mind and heart from centuries-old surroundings to a new and unfamiliar land, with different traditions and cultures. A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* praised her for conveying "the yearnings and ambivalence of the quintessential American figure, the immigrant, whose story is woven tightly with a sense of connection to the land and the people left behind."

In the course of the 1990s, while teaching creative writing at Mills College in Oakland, California, Abinader has continued to march along her personal creative path.

In addition to a volume of verse, *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999), her major work has been a performance piece, *Country of Origin*, which she has presented across the United States and in the Middle East. This three-act one-woman show depicts the lives of a trio of Arab American women and their individual and communal struggles. In it, Abinader becomes her grandmother and mother, and also portrays herself as a young girl. The music fuses age-old Middle Eastern strains with contemporary jazz, with instruments ranging from nai (flute) and oud to drums, violins and saxophones.

Abinader wears the mantle of Arab American writer proudly. In the first place, in her craft circle, she has kept in touch with her colleagues. "At first there was a core group of us that kept in contact with one another all along," she said in a recent interview. "The conference [of Arab American writers] we had in Chicago in October 1999 was a manifestation of something that had been going on for years. Now we have become a bigger group -- people from the [U.S.] South, North, West, people who have immigrated recently and people who have been here a while."

How does she see the state of play of Arab American writers and intellectuals at this point in history?

"We live in a very exciting moment, with a lot of movement. There is a reaching out now, a mixture of traditions, all coming together. For instance, I find myself talking a lot to other Arab writers about magic realism in Latin American writing. We now seem to share an interest in Latin American literature, and see mutual influences going and coming between us."

The trends she sees existing today generally relate to younger writers.

"They set the new trends," she explains. "The poetry slams could be very instrumental for making poetry accessible to the public, for example. They are a mixture of dramatic forms. Creative nonfiction -- memoir, biography -- are now popular, and we very much have a place in that. In terms of the new generation, I think our writers are right there in the mix."

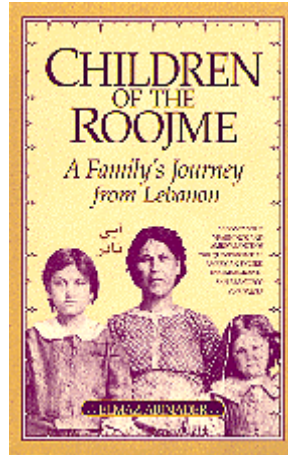
Despite the fact that getting published and having a market appeal remain two of the challenges facing writers in her discipline today, she is quite sanguine regarding the number and quality of contemporary Arab American works on bookshelves and in college courses.

"We have such a rich body of people now. It's a wonderful time to be an Arab American writer."

-- Mofid Deak

4. BOOK REVIEWS

Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey. (book review) Stuttaford, Genevieve.



Publishers Weekly, March 1, 1991 v238 n11 p64(1)

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CHILDREN OF THE ROOJME: A Family's Journey Elmaz Abinader. Norton, \$24.95
ISBN 0-393-02952-2

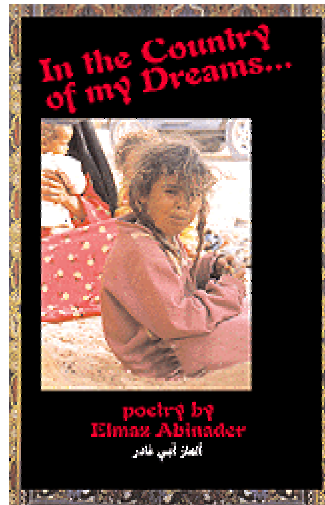
Homesickness is palpable in Abinader's haunting, piercingly lyrical account of four generations of her Lebanese-American family. Her grandfather Rachid, sheik of a mountain village, migrated to Brazil, set up a rubber-trading business, then returned to Lebanon, where political infighting and family feuding drove him from his home. Likewise divided between two continents, his son Jean left for the U.S. in 1937 to set up a dry goods business in Pennsylvania, forsaking the native farmland he loved, but returned to Lebanon in 1973. Shifting back and forth in time, the complex, poignant narrative evokes the hope and despair of a people, making one family's saga emblematic of a nation torn apart. A roojme or hand-built stone terrace bordered the houses of Rachid and his two brothers "just a bunch of rocks," it is a site for courtship and family rites, symbolical anchor in a quicksand world racked by famine, religious strife and war. Abinader, who teaches creative writing at John Jay College in New York, also probes the pangs of acculturation in America. (Apr.)

In the Country of My Dreams

Elmaz Abinader

Joe Lockard

Wednesday, March 22 2000, 10:07 PM



Oakland is one of the unannounced boiling pots of ethnic literatures in the United States. The city's literary productivity has been announced throughout the twentieth century, but to little heed. Gertrude Stein, whose contempt for Oakland's culture was legendary, refused to see modernism in the working class ethos of the city. A writer like Danny Romero, whose neo-existentialist street prose emerges from an unhesitating engagement with the intermixed cultures of this city, finds unending experimentalism in its too-often harsh lives. This is not the gentrification of high-priced San Francisco; this is the realism of a city where problems often outpace answers.

Ethnicity and its expression constitute an experiment in memory, and Oakland's enormous diversity and continual in-migrations have contributed to a groundswell in its culture of words. Elmaz Abinader, whose 1991 book *Children of the Roojme* recounts her extended family memories from among Lebanese immigrants in western Pennsylvania, migrated to the city as a teacher. Abinader's voice is in many ways an example of the intertwined inflections and tones through which the force of ethnicity continually re-invents the mythical beast of 'American literature'.

The first poem of this new volume, 'We are the Nile,' almost half-consciously invokes Langston Hughes' famous lines "I've known rivers; / I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the / flow of human blood in human veins." My own family origins in Altoona tell me that here is not the voice of Abinader's Uniontown: we are far, far away. Rather, as she argues in this opening poem:

We are the Nile.

We are here now bound

in histories the precede
the very sky we recognize
and name, We are here,
our colors side-by-side fused
to one arc,,,

Hughes' Nile merges with the Mississippi; Abinader's Nile is a tributary of San Francisco Bay. The force that creates these mental geographies, following Yi-fu Tuan, is the force of the drive towards the cosmopolitan. The imaginative borrowings and fusings that create a cosmopolitan vitality inhabit Abinader's poetry, shaping its cross-cultural form and concerns. If historical circumstance plays its share in that shape, Abinader expresses a determination to bring personal observation and ethics to bear in creating this far-bridging cosmopolitan-ness. Oakland is neither beginning nor end, but a weaving room.

Crossing worlds by force of imagination leads to realization of that imagining. This volume is an exploration of a borderless country, a state of mind. Yet it is simultaneously a mental travelogue through the bordered countries that have lent themselves to the creation of borderlessness. A tripartite poem like "The Burden of History," for example, traverses time, geography and family generations from Baalbek, to Ellis Island, to Carmichaels, Pennsylvania in the 1990s. What remains after reading the poem is not the separateness of locales and generations, but rather their integration into a continuity. Although the narrative voice emerges from Pennsylvania, its immediacy remains far-off, for "Even now a boat crosses the ocean.../ I look for the desert, the smell of heavy grapevines, / the bleached white cities." Although the boat arrived long since, the voyage has never ended. This same preoccupation with unending traverses characterizes Abinader's observations whether she watches Saudi women negotiate cultural self-alteration as they disembark from a Frankfurt-Jeddah flight or her own sense of cosmic bemusement as she stands in her parents' village overlooking Junieh Bay.

In more than one poem Abinader aligns herself with the passions of Khalil Gibran, whose immigration to the United States left him in a world of dreams. Gibran, for whom immigration was an unhappy and short exile, had nothing left in the end but those dreams. He began in America with the Sandburg-esque evocation of possibility: "It is to stand before the towers of New York, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco saying in your heart, / "I am the descendant of a people that builded Damascus, and Biblus, and Tyre and Sidon, and Antioch, / and now I am here to build with you, and with a will." ("I Believe in You") Yet in the words of Fadwa Tuqan from another autobiographical context, he "entered the vast phantom world of memory." Gibran left Lebanon, but in more than one sense he never arrived in America. Abinader leaves America, but can she reach Lebanon? The trope of dreams is her search for enablement of this journey.

Dreams have their dangers; dreams have their snares of self-absorption, entrapments of inaction, and when active, perversions of realization. The Middle East of the last century has been a ground of contest for opposed dreams, often the dreams of those whose families are spread between continents. Abinader, like Gibran, has the soul of a pacifist in these conflicts. In the title poem, dedicated to Marcel Khalife and Gibran, she writes:

...a fire burns
in the country of my dreams, wicked and consuming,
flying from the hands of soldiers, from the mouths
of children who have been raised by war. Smoldering
on the lips of mothers...

..... ...In the country
of my dreams, no one plots invasions with
armies of soldiers. From the edge
of the sea, it's our poets who set sail...

Thus the dreams that Abinader announce are those of a cultural utopianism, one that repudiates the Levant's conflicts in favor of its rich voices. In poems like "Sixty Minutes" and "Preparing for Occupation" these conflicts do find their political specification and representational identities. Abinader makes clear her opposition to Israel's occupation policies and to the exchange of violences that have defined life in Lebanon for over three decades. Equally, in a poem like "Sixty Minutes," she denies the export of that violence in the form of anti-Arab stereotype and media images unrelieved by humanity.

...You have forgotten
my small hands can grip nothing bigger than a pen
or a needle, that my eyes wander; they do not focus and aim.

But remember that I am an Arab, too, looking for a home
of my own, unoccupied, without siege. I need my fires quiet...

Abinader remains a poet in search of the quiet moment, one where a narrative of internal displacement struggles to incorporate immediate sights into brief written memory. Her language prefers the effects of simplicity and accessibility. Her meditative voice relies on a vocabulary of the instant and the quickness of a descriptive line. The latter section of the book presents this more meditative vein, often in travel poems from Guatemala and Spain where Abinader especially speculates on the consciousnesses of women. Actions and imaginative interiorities meet briefly, sometimes merging and sometimes passing each other by. In Guatemala,

...The men take cover in the hillsides

of Quiché as trucks thick and dangerous with soldiers

grind by. Colors stream down the mountains

where the pebble eyes of women stare at the empty roads.

("Living Without Guatemala")

If men disappear into the foliage hiding from other men, then women hide from them all behind their own eyes.

For Abinader, like poets engaged with their world, a local address is at best a resting point. Oakland is her port of entry into the rest of the world.

Sufi Warrior Publications, 1999

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2. Arab-American Literature

1. LOS HIJOS DE AL-MAHJAR: LA LITERATURA ARABENORTEAMERICANA SE EXTIENDE A LO LARGO DE UN SIGLO

Por Elmaz Abinader

(LITERATURA ESTADOUNIDENSE CONTEMPORANEA:
PERSPECTIVAS MULTICULTURALES

Sociedad y valores estadounidenses

**Publicación electrónica del Departamento de Estado de Estados Unidos, Vol. 5, No.
1, febrero de 2000**

Source: <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0200/ijss/abinader.htm>

Si la vida y la pujanza de una literatura se determinan por la actividad que despierta en torno suyo, la literatura árabenorteamericana experimenta un renacimiento.

En el ambiente estadounidense actual de disfrute y celebración de la literatura de cultura e inmigración, muchos creen haber descubierto la voz árabenorteamericana. La aparición de revistas y periódicos que ponen de relieve la cultura de este grupo étnico, la plétora de organizaciones que se interesan por cuestiones de su identidad e imagen, el acceso a sitios de Internet y medios de búsqueda especializados en los escritos de árabenorteamericanos, las antologías y otras publicaciones que recogen su voz, las conferencias que tienen por tema central a escritores árabenorteamericanos y las convocatorias que destacan las obras de autores y artistas árabenorteamericanos dan la sensación de que la literatura árabenorteamericana es algo que acaba de nacer, que ha descubierto América y que América ha descubierto a los escritores árabenorteamericanos.

Esto no es así. La tradición literaria árabenorteamericana se remonta a los primeros años del siglo XX y hoy continúa floreciendo.

La literatura árabenorteamericana figura en el programa de estudios de las clases de literatura étnica, literatura de inmigración y voces multiculturales. Estudiosos de Estados Unidos y otros países compilan bibliografías de literatura árabenorteamericana y escriben disertaciones sobre la identidad literaria de los escritores árabenorteamericanos.

Muchos creen que esta pujante presencia de la literatura árabenorteamericana es parte o continuación del auge de la literatura étnica de los años setenta en Estados Unidos. En aquella década hicieron su aparición escritores hispanoamericanos, americanos nativos, americanos de origen asiático y afroamericanos, junto, en menor grado, con árabenorteamericanos. Lo que pasó desapercibido en los años setenta es que los árabenorteamericanos fueron unos de los primeros escritores inmigrantes que se organizaron y fueron reconocidos como una fuerza literaria por la comunidad literaria de Estados Unidos en general.

Uno de estos tempranos contingentes, establecidos en los años veinte, era conocido como Al Rabital al Qalamiyah, o la Pen League neoyorquina de escritores. Esta organización, que también era conocida familiarmente por el nombre de Al-Mahjar o poetas inmigrantes, estaba integrada por escritores del Líbano y Siria, que con frecuencia escribían en árabe y colaboraban con los traductores de sus obras. Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy y Elia Abu Madi fueron las grandes figuras de la época y a ellos se les suele atribuir el mérito de haber despertado el interés por la literatura inmigrante en general.

Aunque Gibran, norteamericano de origen libanés, es el más conocido entre los lectores norteamericanos, Ameen Rihani está considerado por todos como el padre de la literatura árabenorteamericana. Sus contribuciones se movieron en las dos direcciones. Admirador de la obra de Walt Whitman y del verso libre, se erigió a sí mismo y a su América en tema de muchas de sus obras. Su novela más famosa, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), escrita en verso, trata directamente de la experiencia del inmigrante. Además de escritor, Rihani era embajador y, como tal, se movía entre su patria libanesa y Estados Unidos, y trabajaba por la independencia de la dominación otomana mientras seguía su vocación literaria en Estados Unidos. Ya en 1905 introdujo el verso libre en el canon poético árabe, caracterizado por su apego a las fórmulas tradicionales y rígidas, lo que contribuyó a la popularidad de que disfrutó en su tierra natal.

En vida de Rihani, se multiplicaron las manifestaciones literarias árabenorteamericanas. En 1892 se fundó el primer periódico en lengua árabe, *Kawkab Amerika*; para 1919, 70.000 inmigrantes ya hacían posible la publicación de 19 periódicos en árabe, muchos de ellos diarios, incluido el popular e influyente *el-Hoda*. Pero la publicación más decisiva para la evolución literaria árabenorteamericana fue una revista, la *Syrian World*. En ella publicaron poemas, cuentos y artículos los escritores más celebrados de comienzos del siglo XX. El más famoso de ellos fue Gibran Khalil Gibran, que acabó siendo uno de los autores más populares de Estados Unidos.

Aunque muchos eruditos consideran la obra de Gibran profundamente filosófica y elemental, en su día se lo consideró entre los grandes de la literatura de Estados Unidos, entre figuras como el poeta Robinson Jeffers, el dramaturgo Eugene O'Neill y el novelista Sherwood Anderson. La obra de Gibran, *El Profeta*, ha estado en la lista de los libros más vendidos de su editorial durante más de medio siglo y, según muchos cálculos, el libro más vendido en Estados Unidos después de la Biblia. Gibran y otros miembros de la Pen League liberaron a los escritores árabenorteamericanos de su inseguridad al presentar temas distintos de la experiencia de la inmigración. Como dramaturgo, novelista, artista y poeta, ha inspirado a otros escritores, músicos, artistas e incluso al Congreso de Estados Unidos, que le dedicó el Jardín de poesía Gibran Khalil, en Washington, D.C., inaugurado por el presidente George Bush en 1990, en memoria de la influencia y los temas universales de la obra de Gibran.

Pero si Gibran Khalil y Rihani recibieron fama y honores, otros miembros del grupo original Al Rabital, entre ellos Mikhail Naimy y Elia Abu Madi, no obtuvieron el reconocimiento que merecían en Estados Unidos, aun cuando Naimy fue propuesto en una ocasión para el Premio Nobel de literatura. Dramaturgo, autor de obras de ficción, periodista y poeta, se distinguió por su carácter políticamente temperamental en sus días de la Pen League, cuando sentó la norma contra la superficialidad y la hipocresía en la literatura. Sus obras aparecieron con frecuencia en las páginas del New York Times; las más conocidas son su biografía de Gibran Khalil Gibran y *The Book of Mirdad*, escrito después que empezó a estudiar las filosofías orientales en busca de solaz y guía, en 1932. Su poesía, pese a haber sido escrita en Estados Unidos, nunca se tradujo al inglés, salvo en antologías tales como *Grape Leaves, A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988), publicada por Gregory Orfalea y Sharif Elmusa.

Tampoco se tradujo la obra de Elia Abu Madi, aunque estaba considerado como el más capacitado y sublime de los escritores del grupo Al-Mahjar. Sus temas van del amor a la guerra. Como los otros escritores de este grupo, su obra es intensamente filosófica y política, pero Madi y los demás escritores de la Pen League no se excusaban o justificaban su condición de árabes ante el público norteamericano. Si bien muchos artículos publicados en el *Syrian World* se referían a cuestiones de norteamericanismo, la mayoría de las veces en un tono positivo, las obras de estos autores tendían a la universalidad. Casi todos ellos escribían en árabe, aunque sus obras se leían fuera de su propio círculos.

La Pen League fue debilitándose hasta desaparecer en los años cuarenta. Los escritores árabes, inmigrantes e hijos de inmigrantes, no se llegaron identificar como grupo y sus obras, en general, no giraban en tonro a su patrimonio o cultura. Una excepción a esta norma es *Syrian Yankee*, novela de Salom Rizk, americano de origen sirio, publicada en 1943, en la que se relata la historia de un inmigrante contra el telón de fondo de la asimilación y la aceptación.

En el período que se extiende, aproximadamente, de finales de los años cuarenta hasta primeros de los ochenta, pocos escritores se identificaron como árabenorteamericanos. No obstante, en este período de transición surgieron importantes poetas independientes. Samuel John Hazo, D.H. Mehlem y Etel Adnan se distinguieron inicialmente como escritores independientes, catalogados en la categoría étnica, que más tarde se colocaron el manto de la identidad árabenorteamericana. Hazo, fundador y director del Foro internacional de poesía de la Universidad de Pittsburg, ha participado activamente en el mundo de la poesía cerca de 30 años, durante los cuales ha actuado de mentor de generaciones de jóvenes promesas. En 1993 fue nombrado poeta oficial de Pennsylvania. Su propia obra refleja una firme conexión con el espacio y la importancia de la observación y el asombro. Una antología reciente, *The Holy Surprise of Now: Selected and New Poems* (1996), ilustra la variedad y luminosidad de sus casi 20 libros.

Los poetas de esa época fueron no sólo un puente entre las dos generaciones de profunda raigambre cultural, sino también vínculos directos entre la literatura árabenorteamericana

y el canon literario americano. D.H. Mehlem, ganadora del American Book Award (premio al libro norteamericano) ha contribuido a que se reconozca la importancia de las culturas subrepresentadas en la literatura norteamericana. Sus estudios críticos de escritores afroamericanos, en particular Gwendolyn Brooks, han sido muy elogiados. Además, Mehlem ha ayudado a incorporar la literatura árabenorteamericana en la corriente nacional al organizar la primera sesión de lectura de poesía árabenorteamericana, en la reunión anual de la Asociación de Lenguas Modernas, en 1984. Etel Adnan, cuya reputación es más internacional que norteamericana, ha promovido la publicación de la literatura árabenorteamericana mediante la fundación de su propia editorial, la Post-Apollo Press. Su poesía, sus obras de ficción y su reportaje (*Of Cities and Women* 1993), se desarrollan en el Cercano Oriente, en medio de las convulsiones políticas y militares, especialmente en Beirut. En su novela *Sitt Marie-Rose* (1991), escribe de la separación transcultural, contra el fondo de la trama social de Beirut.

Adnan, Hazo y Mehlem, junto con el verso elegante e irónico de Joseph Awad, han preparado el camino para la generación actual de escritores árabenorteamericanos, de los que ellos mismos siguen siendo decididamente parte integral. Si bien antes de los años setenta y ochenta no era habitual identificarse a sí mismo con arreglo al propio patrimonio cultural, el clima político y las tendencias literarias empezaron a insistir en que así se hiciera. Después de irrumpir en la escena la voz afroamericana a finales de los años sesenta, otros grupos multiculturales empezaron a reclamar su puesto en la historia y literatura de Estados Unidos. Todavía tendrían que pasar más de diez años antes de que los escritores árabenorteamericanos logaran esta condición.

La obra decisiva fue un pequeño volumen de poesía, *Grape Leaves*, publicado por Gregory Orfalea en 1982. Antes de esa fecha ninguna antología de versos se había adentrado en esos temas y había resonado con esa sensibilidad. Para 1988, en las estanterías de las librerías se exhibían con orgullo la antología ampliada de Orfalea y Elmusa, y *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, publicada por Joanna Cadi (1994), y en fecha más reciente, *Jusoor's Post Gibran Anthology of New Arab Writing*, editada por Khaled Mattawa y Munir Akash (1999). Estos volúmenes, que contaban con el refrendo de periódicos tales como *Al Jadid* y la revista *Mizna*, recogían la obra de escritores árabenorteamericanos, preocupados o no por temas de cultura e identidad. Estas antologías ofrecen a lectores y eruditos un caudal de recursos documentales sobre escritores árabenorteamericanos así como una oportunidad de evaluar las voces colectivas.

Tres hechos saltan a la vista al examinar las colecciones de obras árabenorteamericanas. En primer lugar, la literatura árabenorteamericana es ahora, obra de escritores procedentes de todos los países, incluidos África del Norte y el Golfo, no sólo de representantes del Mediano Oriente. Segundo, los temas de estas obras no se limitan a cuestiones de cultura e identidad, sino que son amplios y de gran alcance. Hoy, los escritores árabenorteamericanos van más allá del cuento y los poemas enraizados en la patria y el patrimonio cultural. Exploran nuevos panoramas (relacionados con los años que llevan viviendo en Estados Unidos) y cuestiones políticas y sociales nacionales que

afectan su vida cotidiana. Tercero, el aumento considerable del número de voces femeninas en la literatura árabenorteamericana, desde los años setenta y la llegada de Mehlem y Adnan. En conjunto, esto ha sido parte de la tendencia nacional en Estados Unidos desde la aparición del movimiento feminista, a finales de los años sesenta. Después, muchos otros han seguido las huellas de Mehlem y Adnan.

Muchos de los principales poetas de Estados Unidos, que no encajan en ninguna clasificación, son de origen árabe. Naomi Shihab Nye, norteamericana de origen palestino, ha sido aclamada en numerosas ocasiones como poetisa excepcional, escritora de prosa y de antologías. Aunque infunde un sentido de cultura a sus poemas, ésta puede ser una cultura que ella misma posee, visita o ha inventado. Nye ha escrito libros para niños y ha recogido poemas y cuadros de escritores y artistas árabes de todo el mundo en su antología *The Space Between Our Footsteps* (1998). Otros libros excepcionales de Nye son *Never in a Hurry: Essays on People and Places* (1996), *Benito's Dream Bottle* (1995) y *Habibi* (1997).

La presencia de la literatura árabenorteamericana y su comprensión se debe en parte a una serie de escritores que han iniciado su estudio sistemático y erudito. Evelyn Shakir, profesora del Bentley College ha abierto la marcha con su libro *Bint Arab* (1997), en el que presenta semblanzas, a través de narrativas personales, de mujeres árabes que mantienen el delicado equilibrio de sus propias tradiciones culturales y el modo de vida y las oportunidades que encuentran en Estados Unidos. Además de ella, la escritora y poetisa Lisa Suhair Majaj ha hecho estudios críticos de la evolución de la literatura árabenorteamericana. En un ensayo de gran perspicacia política e histórica, Majaj sugiere que "lo que necesitamos no son demarcaciones más nítidas y definitivas de identidad, sino más bien una ampliación y transformación de estas demarcaciones. Al ampliar y profundizar nuestra comprensión de la etnicidad, no estamos renunciando a nuestra condición de árabes, sino haciendo sitio a la complejidad de nuestras experiencias". Majaj y otras estudiosas como Loretta Hall y Bridget K. Hall, a las que se debe el volumen exhaustivo *Arab American Biography* (1999), continúan la labor de Orfalea y Elmusa en la creación de un compendio de gran valor, que muchos consideran la principal fuente documental de la literatura árabenorteamericana.

Algunos escritores de origen árabenorteamericano han triunfado fuera del ambiente esotérico del público erudito al atraerse al lector ordinario. El mejor ejemplo hoy en día es la americana de origen sirio Mona Simpson, cuya novela *Anywhere But Here* 1987, en la que narra la historia de una indómita madre soltera y su impresionable hija, sirvió de tema para una película rodada en Hollywood en 1999 que fue protagonizada por Susan Sarandon y Natalie Portman. Simpson es autora de otras dos historias recientes: *The Lost Father* (1991) y *A Regular Guy* (1996). *Arabian Jazz*, de Diana Abu-Jaber, tuvo también una buena acogida entre un amplio círculo de lectores. Abu-Jaber no se anda con rodeos al retratar la vida en la comunidad árabe, que hace con modestia y buen humor, y un tono entre dulce y amargo y nostálgico. Al refrescar la memoria, mantiene vivas las cuestiones de supervivencia. Junto con *Arabian Jazz*, se puede citar *Through and Through* (1990), colección de cuentos de Joseph Geha, que nos permite vislumbrar un cuadro brillante y

apasionado de la comunidad libanesa de Toledo, Ohio, que rivaliza con el colorido irónico de Abu-Jaber, en la que a veces es una tensa atmósfera política.

Fieles a la tradición árabe, los poetas contemporáneos de la comunidad árabenorteamericana escriben con pasión y compromiso de identidad, cultura y vida y representan muchos estilos y voces. Elmusa se refiere a esto en un poema cuando implora "poetas, críticos/miembros de otras tribus,/os ruego, no reduzcamos la poesía de la tribu/a un odre de poemas/sobre la tribu". Su ruego ha sido escuchado por muchos poetas árabenorteamericanos que, como en el caso de los escritores de diversas tradiciones culturales que permanecen fuera de la corriente general-- convierten las complejas cuestiones de identidad y lugar en puntos focales de su labor y su persona.

La nueva generación responde a estilos e inquietudes que parecen estar muy lejos de las raíces de Gibran y Rihani. Suheir Hammad, por ejemplo, en volúmenes tales como *Drops of This Story* (1996), reconoce una afinidad entre sus antecedentes culturales y la voz afronorteamericana. En *Heifers and Heroes* (1999), se vale de una percepción cultural a través de una imagen publicitaria, el hombre de Marlboro, para evocar la vida en las calles del ghetto urbano. Ella y otros miembros de esta generación están más cerca de la universalidad de Al Mahjar, en sus experimentos con el "rap" y la palabra hablada, el arte escénico y el vernáculo. Las grabaciones de Natalie Handal, el campo de nunca, está lleno de verdades impenetrables que surgen del trabajo, directamente vinculado a la historia en cuestión y, sobre todo, al mundo literario contemporáneo, pero con posibilidades de expansión en ideas, algo que era una especialidad de la generación de Al-Mahjar. De hecho, la palabra hablada, como forma artística, pudo haber sido muy querida de Gibran, que escribió obras de teatro y experimentó con formas que tenían amplio atractivo.

Evidentemente, los poetas árabenorteamericanos no están atascados en una tradición de simple homenaje y nostalgia ni se aferran a formas y estilos seguros que les permite ser fácilmente categorizados. Antes bien, aparecen en todas partes, desde las lecturas ante el micrófono a los concursos modernos de poesía celebrados en cafés (a los que se conoce familiarmente como "slams"), a las páginas de antologías poéticas de prestigio y revistas literarias. En octubre de 1999, algunos de ellos viajaron a Chicago para participar en un acontecimiento histórico; la primera conferencia de escritores árabenorteamericanos, organizada por el escritor norteamericano de origen palestino Ray Hanania, cuyo sitio en la web (<http://www.hanania.com>) es un centro de información al día sobre literatura, cultura y política árabenorteamericanas.

2. ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN POETS SHOWCASE THEIR WORK

(Source: <http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/nea/text/1118arbwmn.htm>)

Poetry describes a rich and diverse Arab American experience

By Ghada Elnajjar

Washington File Staff Writer

18 November 2002

Washington — Seeking to create better understanding between her adopted homeland and her ancestral homeland, Arab American poet Nathalie Handal recently shared her most recent work at a groundbreaking poetry reading on November 13 at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

Reading to a packed theater, Handal was joined on the stage by two other Arab American female poets, Shihab Nye and Elmaz Abinader, to showcase their work and the work of other Arab women represented in Handal's anthology, "The Poetry of Arab Women," published in 2000. The anthology includes poetry written by 84 Arab women poets living in the Arab world and in the Diaspora including Arab Americans, Arabs in France, and as Handal put it, "there is even a Palestinian writing in Swedish." The poems, written in many languages, including Arabic, were all translated into English for publication in Handal's book. According to Handal, nearly every Arab country is represented in the collection.

In an interview with the Washington File, Handal said that the idea for "The Poetry of Arab Women" anthology came to her as she traveled throughout the Middle East sharing her work with Arab audiences and students on university campuses. Handal realized that Arab American writers in general, and particularly Arab American women writers, are little known in the Arab world.

"What is amazing about Arab American literature today," Handal said, "is that of most of the people writing, the big majority are Arab American women writers."

Her new book coming out soon on Arab American literature (which includes work written by men and women covering all genres) features "a lot of women's voices," she said.

Handal shared her experience of going to the University of Jordan and reading a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that she wrote about her fig tree.

"A crowd of people came to me asking, 'Who is this person? How come she has such an Arab soul and Arab sentiment?' Now everyone knows who Naomi Shihab Nye is, but at the time, there was not as much knowledge of who Arab Americans are. So it became very important to gather all these voices together."

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When she's in the Middle East, Handal said that people consider her American, and when she's in the United States she's Arab. "I know what my identity is," said Handal, whose piece called "Poetry As Homeland" discusses her identity as a woman, as an Arab American, as a Palestinian and as a poet.

"As an Arab American," she said, "I feel that I am also part of the collective Palestinian culture, society, consciousness and expansion of Palestinian literature, even if it is not written in Arabic."

While working on the anthology, Handal wanted to highlight the commonality that brings Arab women together, as well as expose the differences, the richness and the diversity that exists among Arabs in the Middle East and in the Diaspora. Handal believes that Arab women, whether they are in the Diaspora or in the Middle East, are still Arabs facing similar issues in different contexts. "I wanted to unify this oneness, without erasing the differences," she said.

The richness and diversity of the Arab American experience, as well as the unifying voice of Arab culture, are also evident in the poets' own life stories. Following is biographical information about the three Arab American women poets who read their poetry on November 13.

Nathalie Handal

Handal, who currently lives in the upper west side of New York City where many immigrants live, has many poems that relate to the experience of immigrants, coming to America and loving America but never forgetting their homeland.



Nathalie Handal

Handal's family emigrated from the city of Bethlehem to the United States, Central America, South America and the Caribbean at the beginning of the 20th century. Like her ancestors, Handal has lived in the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean, and has traveled extensively in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Her poetry describes the colorful backgrounds of her relatives living in the United States, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

During the poetry reading, Handal read a poem called "El Amuerzo De Tia Habiba" (The Breakfast of Aunt Habiba). The poem told the story of her aunts and uncle gathering on Friday mornings to feast on her Aunt Habiba's prepared meal of tamalitos, hommos, and laban – a menu embracing both Mexican and Arab culinary traditions. The images of the Mount of Olives, the Old City, the Mediterranean Sea, and the desert heat, are often interwoven in Handal's poems, and she spoke of how Tia Habiba's eyes told about the holy land.

Poetry is not the only tool Handal uses to build an understanding between her adopted

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home and that of her ancestors. She is the co-curator of a Palestinian art show, "Williamsburg Bridges Palestine," a month long art exhibit of Palestinian artists from Palestine and abroad. The show, which features 800 pieces of art, is presented during the entire month of November by Williamsburg Art & Cultural Center, in Brooklyn, New York.

Handal's work has appeared in numerous magazines and literary journals in the United States, Europe and the Middle East, including The Literary Review, Orbis, Ambit Stone Soup, Sable, Jusoor, Visions-International, Al Jadid, Al Karmel, as well as in many anthologies. She writes in English, and her work has been translated into French, Spanish and Arabic.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Nye was born in St. Louis, Missouri to a Palestinian father and an American mother.

Her father became a refugee in 1948 as a result of the Arab-Israeli war, and later immigrated to the United States to attend college. An editor at the Dallas Morning News, he was one of the few Arab Americans to achieve a senior editorial position with a major American daily newspaper.



Naomi Shihab Nye

In her writing, Nye, who currently lives in San Antonio, Texas, draws on the voices of the Mexican-Americans that live near her, as well as the perspectives of Arab-Americans and the ideas and practices of the different local subcultures of the United States.

Nye told the audience that upon her arrival in Washington, D.C., for the poetry reading, she was picked up from the airport by an immigrant taxi driver. Naomi realized that both she and the driver were wearing exactly the same Afghani hat that both had bought in Pakistan. Their conversation then turned to sharing stories about their rose gardens. She found herself thinking, "This is life in this country. I love it so much."

In response to September 11, Nye wrote a letter entitled, "To Any Would-Be Terrorists," which was published in "September 11, 2002, American Writers Respond." In the letter Nye writes, "I am humble in my country's pain and I am furious." Addressing the "would-be terrorist," she said that, "not only did your colleagues kill thousands of innocent, international people in those buildings and scar their families forever, they wounded a huge community of people in the Middle East, in the United States and all over the world. If that's what they wanted to do, please know the mission was a terrible success, and you can stop now."

At the reading, Nye talked about her visits to Michigan, which she described as "the state that welcomed more Arab Americans than any other." In the poem "Steps," Nye offered striking imagery to describe the bond that an immigrant community has with its old

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country.

"A man letters a sign for his grocery in Arabic and English. Paint dries more quickly in English. The thick swoops and curls of Arabic letters stay moist and glistening till tomorrow when the children show up jingling their dimes. They have learned the currency of the new world...one of these children will tell a story that keeps her people alive..."

Her most recent book of poems called "19 Varieties of Gazelle," a collection of her poems on the Middle East, published this year, has just been nominated as one of the finalists for the prestigious "National Book Award." Nye has received awards from the Texas Institute of Letters, the Carity Randall Prize, and the International Poetry Forum.

Elmaz Abinader

At the poetry reading, Abinader began by invoking peace upon her audience, "Asalam Alikum," she said in Arabic, and her audience responded with, "Wa Alikum Asalam."

Born and raised in the small southwest Pennsylvania town of Carmichaels, known for coalmining, Abinader told the story of her family in her landmark memoir "Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon." The book deals with the starvation that gripped Lebanon in World War I, which killed off a quarter of the population. The book also talks about her family's journeys back and forth between Lebanon and the new world, including her father's peddling on the Amazon River in the 1920s.



Elmaz Abinader

Abinader was first introduced to the public in "Grape Leaves, a Century of Arab-American Poetry," as the youngest poet featured in the anthology. Her poetry tends to focus on such themes as the oppressed, those who work the earth, and the cultures of Arabs and Arab Americans.

She read a poem that she was commissioned to write in honor of Khalil Gibran's 100th birthday. That poem dealt with Gibran's ideas about "Reason and Passion," the ability to balance logic and emotion. She told the audience that her inspiration came to her one day as she was riding a public transportation bus in Oakland, California. "Given the choice, Khalil," she wrote, "I would pick passion over reason. Let my heart swell and rush toward the danger of fast love, or easy anger."

Abinader recently won the Oakland PEN Josephine Miles Literary Award for Multi-Cultural Poetry, for her first collection of poetry, "In the Country of My Dreams."

She has also written plays. Her three-act show, "Country of Origin," won two Drammies (drama awards) from the Portland's Critics Circle Awards for Theater. Her new play, "Under the Ramadan Moon," which explores the typical stereotypes of Arabs and Arab

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Americans, is currently touring.

The reading of "The Poetry of Arab Women," was part of the Folger Shakespeare Library's Poetry Series, which provides a stage for coteremporary poetry. The Folger is an independent research library that is privately endowed and supported. The Folger Library is home to the world's largest collection of Shakespeare's printed works, as well as outstanding collections of other rare Renaissance books and manuscripts.

Just off Main Street

by **Elmaz Abinader**

WRITERS ON AMERICA

(SOURCE: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/abinader.htm>)

I. Crossing the Threshold

When I was young, my house had a magic door. Outside that door was the small Pennsylvania town where I grew up. Main Street ran in front of our house bearing the standard downtown features: a bank, a news stand, the hardware store, the auto parts supply, and other retail businesses. Families strolled the streets, particularly on weekends looking at the displays of furniture in Kaufman's giant window, the posters for movies hanging behind the glass at the Rex Theatre, and the mannequins, missing hands or fingers, sporting the latest fashions in the windows of my aunt's clothing store. In those days, the early 1960s, the small businesses in a town like Masontown fed the community's needs for food, clothing, and shelter.

My family's shops took their positions on Main Street as well: Nader's Shoe Store, Nader's Department Store, and the Modernnaire Restaurant. From the face of it, our businesses looked like any others and we gratefully satisfied the local mother trying to buy church-worthy shoes for the children, the father in for a good cigar and the newspaper, and the after-school crowd, who jittered near the juke box on the restaurant tiles. My father and my uncle stood in the doorways of their establishments, perfectly dressed in gray suits and white shirts, ties, and glossy polished shoes.

At that moment, frozen in second grade, at the threshold of the store, I saw no difference between my father, uncle, and the people who passed by. Many of them too sent their children to Mrs. Duffy for piano lessons, shopped at the A & P, and bar-b-qued in the backyard on the Fourth of July. Many of my dad's customers had their children in All Saints School with me. Their daughters had shiny bikes with streamers flowing from the handlebars. The popular girls, Jeannie and Renee, wore freshly polished Mary Jane shoes every day, and discussed quite vocally their ever growing collection of Barbie doll paraphernalia. I listened with fascination to the descriptions of a house for Barbie, her car, and her wardrobe. Jeannie wrapped her finger around her blond pony tail as she described Barbie's ball gown. Renee pulled her spit curl into a C as she showed us pictures of her trip to Virginia Beach.

In these moments of social exchange, the illusion of similarity between me and the girls in my class floated away, bubble light. Despite sharing the same school uniform, being in the Brownies, singing soprano in the choir, and being a good speller, my life and theirs were separated by the magic door. And although my classmates didn't know what was behind that portal, they circled me in the playground and shouted "darkie" at my braids trying to explode into a kinky mop, or "ape" at my arms bearing mahogany hair against my olive pale skin. It was dizzying and my stomach squirrel-squealed in loneliness.

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I dragged myself home to our gray-shingled house on Main Street feeling the weight of my book bag and the heaviness of the differences between me and the girls jumping rope just across the street. As I pulled on the silver aluminum handle of the screen door that led to the hallway of our house, the rust crumbled against my thumb. Nothing was particularly enchanting about this door, but when I entered, the context of the world changed.

Drawing me from the entrance, down the hall, to the dining room, was one of my favorite smells. It was Wednesday, the day of the week when my mother covered the table for eight with newspaper, dragged two large blue cans from the pantry, and lined up the cookie sheets. By the time I arrived home from school in the afternoon, the house smelled of Arabic bread and loaves and loaves of the round puffy disks leaned against each other in rows on the table. She made triangles of spinach pies, cinnamon rolls, and fruit pies filled with pears from the trees growing on our land. Before greeting me, she looked up, her face flour-smudged, and said, "There are 68 loaves. You can have one."

By now, my sisters have joined me at one end of the table where we pass the apple butter to each other to slather on the warm bread. When Arabic bread comes out of the oven, it is filled with air and looks like a little pillow; as it cools, the bread flattens to what Americans recognize as "pita" bread. Other bread was rarely eaten in our house; even when we put hot dogs on the grill, they were dropped into a half of "cohbs," then covered with ketchup.

The smell was hypnotic and mitigated the melancholy I carried home with my lessons to do that night. The revelry ended soon after we finished our treat. Each child of the six of us had after-school duties. My three brothers reported to the store to clean and manage the inventory, and we three girls shared the demands of house and garden. In the summer, we weeded, watered, and picked the vegetables; in the fall, we reported to the basement where we canned fruits, beans, jams, and pickles. Between these seasons were endless piles of laundry, ironing, and cleaning to maintain the nine people who filled our little house. Barbies, coloring books, after-school sports were other children's worlds, not ours.

Behind the magic door, the language shifted as well. Mother-to-daughter orders were delivered in Arabic -- homework, conversations, and the rosary, in the most precise English possible. Three things dominated our lives: devotion to God, obedience to our parents, and good grades in school. A sliver of an error in any of these areas was punished with swiftness and severity. The reputation of our family relied on our perfection and my parents had no idea that their struggling-to-be-perfect daughters digested unsavory ridicule from their peers.

Our social interactions on the other side of the door had little weight inside the house. We had a different community who gathered on weekends and during the summer. Relatives from towns around Pennsylvania and Ohio filled our living room and dining room, circling the table crowded with my mother's fabulous array of Arabic dishes: *hummus*, chick bean dip, *baba ghanouj*, eggplant with sesame, stuffed grape leaves, shish kebob,

kibbee, raw or fried lamb and bulgur wheat patties, a leg of lamb, a turkey stuffed with rice and raisins and platter after platter of side dishes. The famous Arabic bread sat skyscraper high on plates at either end.

My uncle, the priest, blessed the table, and the chatter of Arabic began as cousins dipped their bread, scooped up the tabouleh salad, and daintily bit the sweet baklava pastry. As the end of the meal approached, we pushed slightly away from the table, as my father told a story of the old days, or someone read a letter from Lebanon; or a political argument snarled across the empty dishes.

We girls cleared the table and Arabic music wound its way out of the record player. Before we knew it, someone started a line dance and others linked arms, and stomping and kicking and clapping shook the house. As children and as worker bees, we were busy, both cleaning dishes and bringing the adults anything they wanted, as well as standing up to having our cheeks pinched and our bodies lifted into the air.

My family scenes filled me with joy and belonging, but I knew none of it could be shared on the other side of that door. The chant of schoolyard slurs would intensify. Looking different was enough; having a father with a heavy accent already marked me, dancing in circles would bury me as a social outcast.

II. Making a Writer

In college, a school one hundred times larger in population than my home town, I walked the campus with a fascination. Past the line of the ginkgo trees, I entered the Cathedral of Learning, the skyscraper at the University of Pittsburgh where the English Department was housed. On the first floor of this beautiful building are the Nationality Classrooms. These rooms are designed to represent different cultural notions of classroom design. The English Room featured benches from the House of Commons, the Hungarian Room presented the paprika-colored panels of flower design set into the wall, and the Chinese Room, dedicated to Confucius, put the students in round tables without a sense of hierarchy. We had some classes in these quarters, often unhappy with the stiffness of the furniture or the care we had to take with our equipment. One room was locked and could only be seen by permission or during a tour. I studied the plaque outside the door. *The Syria-Lebanese Room*. Here again, a door dividing the outside "American" world from my world. Naturally, I made it a point to see the room, inviting my friends along.

At the moment we entered, our breath froze. The room was covered in Persian rug designs, glass multi-colored lights, brass tables, and cushions against the wall around the perimeter. It was lush and exotic and suddenly the pride of being associated with this palace worked its way inside of me. In charge of my own identity in college, I announced my heritage, wrote about my grandmother, cooked Arabic food for my friends, and played the music of Oum Kalthoum at gatherings at my house.

It wasn't long before I understood that my display of my Arab-ness served to exoticize me. In the curriculum, nothing of Arab writing was represented; on television, the only person associated with Lebanon was Danny Thomas; and *Lawrence of Arabia* became the footnote to my culture. Concurrently, the events in the Middle East clarified the sympathies in the United States as not pro-Arab; and as I grew, feelings toward Arabs became more negative and sometimes bordered on distrust, even from my own colleagues.

I persisted in my writing. A poem about my mother leaving Lebanon and making a home in the United States, a story about my grandfather living like a refugee during World War I, my father's adventures as a rubber trader in Brazil when he was a young man became my themes, and I intuitively released these stories and poems as if the whole history was bottled up inside of me.

Still, my writing was happening *inside* the door. Outside, in my classroom, in my bachelor's and master's program, some years later, the literature we read was as foreign to my natural sensibility as Barbie was to my childhood milieu. The models for writers included a substantial number of European-identified male authors who wrote eloquently about mainstream American culture. In my writing corner of the world, I penned stories of children dying during the Ottoman siege of our village in Lebanon. I felt music in my poetry that was strange to American ears; my images gathered in a shiny brocade of detail, more lush than other writing of the 1970s.

I did not feel welcome outside the door.

But I persisted. Somewhere in my journey, I put my hand on a book that made the difference. The title first attracted me: *The Woman Warrior*, and the author had a name that was uncommon: *Maxine Hong Kingston*. Inside this book, I discovered a grandmother who talked stories, daughters who were too American for their family; a culture completely strange to the people around them. In essence, this writer knew, she knew, what was inside the door and she wrote about it. This book not only led me to the body of literature available in the Chinese-American canon, but I found African-American, Latino, Native American writers, whose voices resounded about some of the same issues: belonging, identity, cultural loneliness, community, and exoticization.

The strains of my music seeped through cracks and under the threshold, the stomp of the dance pushed the door out of the way. I listened to Toni Morrison in an interview answer the question, "Do you write because of racism?" She said, "I write *in spite* of racism." Writers were claiming their place not only in literature, but also in the perception of history.

Participating in activism had always been an important part of being a citizen of the United States for me. My years were marked with political causes for which I marched, protested, signed petitions, and organized committees. Now I began to understand: As a

writer, I was also an activist. Telling a good story, writing a beautiful poem pierced the reader more deeply than any rhetoric could manage.

In addition, I found a community: American writers and artists of color often travel the same terrain as I do, living with dual sensitivities, negotiating where one culture I inhabit conflicts with my other culture, looking for a place that is home.

Times have been challenging for Arab-Americans because our countries of origin are often embroiled in conflict and political controversy. The more difficult it becomes, the bigger role *my good story* and *my beautiful poem* play in contributing to a perspective of the events and the people. Readers will often trust literature more than speeches or articles, and I find that my love of writing is interwoven with my responsibility to write.

I have a new small town. It's not anywhere in particular, or maybe it's everywhere. In this village, people live with their doors open, moving back and forth over the threshold of what has been exclusive to what will some day be inclusive. As a writer, I make my life known and woven into the fabric of literature. As an activist, I look toward other young writers of color and let them know, they might have to lean with their shoulder, put their whole body into it, but if they push on that door it will eventually open.

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